

Sobriety is now top priority in Port Graham

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Sobriety and community wellness are now a top priority for residents of Port Graham. Many years ago when alcohol was introduced to the village, drunkenness, violence, sexual abuse, accidents and suicide were commonplace, according to villagers.

But today residents aren't tolerating that type of behavior. They want to get things back to the way they were before the alcohol was introduced to their remote Kachemak Bay village of 200 people.

continued on page ten

• Port Graham wins award

continued from page one

Nearly the entire community has pulled together to get rid of alcohol in their lives, and their efforts have not gone unnoticed.

Earlier this month the community of Port Graham was presented with the Surgeon General Award by an Indian Health Service official for their efforts in promoting community wellness.

Village Chief and Community Health Aide Elenore McMullin said the community's sobriety movement and wanting family wellness was all tied together.

"It has been an ongoing thing for several years — the past eight years," McMullin said. "One person here and

one person there getting sober."

Some of the reasons McMullin cites for the turnaround are the attitude of the leadership, the health staff's support and the entire community wanting change.

"A big role is that people are saying that it's not OK to drink," she said during a recent telephone interview.

The alcohol treatment program at Port Graham is funded in part by the state and IHS, and a small portion is from private donations.

Dr. Tom Nighswander, director of community health services at the Alaska Native Medical Center in Anchorage, said Port Graham is an example of an Alaska community that has made tremendous strides toward

community wellness. He said the strides are tremendous because Port Graham was a community where alcoholism was severe.

Nighswander said the most important fact is that Port Graham, as a community, recognized people from outside their village were not going to solve their problems. They had to figure out a way to do that themselves and that is what they did.

McMullin said one program, "A place to come alive," is very successful. She said the two-week program involves many parents.

She said one of the things that more sobriety among people has brought to the community is less violence.

"There was extreme violence within families, but right now there is no sexual abuse that we know of. The accident rate has gone down," she said, adding there also are fewer suicide attempts and less child neglect.

And Nighswander said the community has a safe home for abused women that has not been used in recent years.

With a new sense of life, residents are curious about why alcohol abuse became rampant in their community.

"I think the sobriety movement has led people to want to know more about the past, how people were affected years ago — by alcohol — and what was it like before alcohol," McMullin said.

The village is working on an elders conference to assist the community in getting a sense of what the past was like.

Nighswander said Port Graham residents are a good example of what a community can do while working on a common goal.

And he said Port Graham is leading the way in the fight against alcohol in the state of Alaska.